DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 342 UD 034 855

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TITLE The Will and the Way: Local Partnerships, Political Strategy, and the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth. Faculty Research Working Paper Series.
INSTITUTION Harvard Univ., Cambridge, MA. Kennedy School of Government.
SPONS AGENCY Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.; Rockefeller Foundation, New York, NY.
REPORT NO KSG-RWP01-050
PUB DATE 2002-01-00
NOTE 66p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety (6th, Cambridge, MA, December 6-7, 2001). Also funded by the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ksg.harvard.edu.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Advocacy; *Child Welfare; Children; Community Involvement; Cooperative Planning; Local Issues; Political Issues; *Problem Solving; *Public Policy; Social Environment
IDENTIFIERS *Public Private Partnership Programs; *Social Policy

ABSTRACT

In an era of devolution in much social policy, many initiatives seek to improve child, youth, and family well-being through locally-governed, data-driven partnerships. These partnerships are not limited to savvy technical reform of policies or programs. They target a change in political will, policy agendas, and policy implementation arrangements, all driven by broad and sustained local movements on behalf of children. Part of a larger project on how community problem solving is evolving worldwide, this paper critically examines what such locally-based efforts actually do, noting the key strategic challenges they confront. It emphasizes the distinct dimensions of political work implied in an era of partnership-driven problem solving, explores the roles of coalition building in local politics, and analyzes the special challenges that partnerships face when they are, at once, interest-driven coalitions that ensure political support and operational alliances through which players seek to jointly produce the better outcomes they seek. Special attention is given to the roles of intermediary players that help other players navigate these challenges and to the multiple demands made of grassroots and elite stakeholders. (Contains 80 references.) (Author/SM)

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John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
Faculty Research Working Paper Series

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RWP01-050

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THE WILL AND THE WAY: LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS, POLITICAL STRATEGY, AND THE WELL-BEING OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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January 2002

Presented at the sixth meeting of the Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety, on "Building Coalitions to Bring About Change," sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Foundation and chaired by William Julius Wilson at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 6-7, 2001.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and Harvard's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations fund the larger research project of which this study is a part. Celeste Benson, Karen Bhatia, Nidhi Mirani, Dan Nicolai, Tim Reith, and Jonathan Taylor provided superb research support for this paper. Many thanks to the directors of the RWJ Urban Health Initiative and to Larry Aber, Debbie Alvarez, Debra Delgado, Mark Moore, Karen Pittman, Lisbeth Schorr, Ralph Smith, and Gary Walker for helpful advice.
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THE WILL AND THE WAY:
Local Partnerships, Political Strategy, and the Well-being of America's Children and Youth

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January 2002

Abstract. In an era of devolution in much social policy, a growing number of initiatives aim to improve the well-being of children, youth, and their families through locally governed, data-driven "partnerships" of various kinds. Broadly stated, the aims of these partnerships are not limited to savvy technical reform of policies or programs. Their aims target "systems change" of a much more daunting variety—a change in political will, policy agendas, *and* policy implementation arrangements, all driven by broad and sustained local movements on behalf of our children. Part of a larger research project on how community problem-solving is evolving around the globe, this paper takes a critical look at what such locally-based efforts actually do and at the key strategic challenges they confront. It emphasizes the distinct dimensions of political work implied in an era of partnership-driven problem-solving, explores the roles of coalition building in local politics, and analyzes the special challenges that partnerships face when they are, at once, *interest-driven coalitions* that ensure political support and *operational alliances* through which players seek to jointly produce the better outcomes they seek. Special attention is given to the roles of intermediary players that help other players navigate these challenges and to the multiple demands made of "grassroots" and "grasstops" (elite) stakeholders.

Introduction

This paper is about creating the mandate and the means—the will and the way—needed to significantly improve the well-being of children and youth in communities across America. It is based on interviews with veteran organizers, managers, advocates, and scholars in the field broadly encompassing child and youth development, human services for young people, and organizing and advocacy efforts in these domains, as well as a wide-ranging review of research on the subjects of building movements, navigating local politics, persuading, and forging productive

alliances to accomplish important public purposes. The study focused on locally-based efforts to create and sustain high-impact partnerships that change "systems" affecting young people and their families. It is part of a larger inquiry into *community problem-solving* – the processes by which local players and their allies mobilize collective action and secure both the political support and the productive capacity to get important, shared problems solved. The overall lessons of this study are about political behavior as well as organizational change, ways of thinking as well as ways of acting. These overall lessons may be surprising to some:

- *Problem-solving without politics.* Politics and political strategy are everywhere implied in the work of local systems change but often missing, or vague, in documentation or analysis of that work. Much available work in the field calls for political action – understanding interests and agendas, framing issues for public consideration, obtaining and sustaining support, and institutionalizing changes that may be perceived as threatening or risky – without addressing in any detail the diagnosing and the doing of politics. A technical-managerial language emphasizing cooperation dominates any consideration of political conflicts. It is as though we hope to influence powerful institutions and decision-makers without ever confronting realities associated with political differences or the use of political power;

- *Advocacy without place.* The available wisdom on advocating for children and youth, including the provision of expert guidance in very political policy debates, rarely addresses the local-ness of politics and civic capacity – i.e., the power to recognize and solve important problems in cities. With few exceptions, discussions of advocacy means and targets rarely address the importance of *local* political arrangements, such as the form and focus of dominant or "governing" coalitions that move significant political agendas over time or the patterned relationships between local government and its neighborhoods. Though framed in important ways by upstream policies at the state and federal levels, it is local political arrangements that most determine whether a community will develop and sustain a significant mandate around any important public issue that requires parties to problem solve together.[1]

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[1] In the context of improving both youth-serving capacity and youth policy decisions, see Pittman and Irby (1998) and Pittman, Irby, and Therber (2000) on the importance of a local and regional focus. On

The devolution of much decision-making to states and localities, and the increased demand for collaborative and "community-based" approaches closer to the client, have only made these local political arrangements more important and their absence in child and youth policy discussions more worrisome; and

- *Partnerships without distinctions.* A significant disconnect persists between the expectations we hold of social-purpose "partnerships" and the concepts and language we use to envision, convene, and evolve them. Indeed, the word "partnership" is often so elastic as to enable few of the players involved to draw crucial distinctions, size up important risks, and thereby better invest time, money, reputation, and other precious resources. Moreover, we have too few well-studied examples of efforts to simultaneously build *interest-based coalitions* that move political agendas and forge *high-performing operational alliances* that produce the kinds of outcomes we want—families that are more capable and young people that are healthier, safer, better educated, more confident and happy, and more connected to a future. Both types of work, coalition building and alliance building, include "political" behavior, and both are implied, but rarely distinguished, in available analyses of local partnerships.

What are the implications of these broad and rather diagnostic lessons? A number of possibilities for more strategic political behavior, and also for important investments in organizational capacity, emerge from the broad, diagnostic lessons above. These lessons address, in particular, the importance and the limits of the marketing or "strategic communication" perspective for building political will, the difference between getting attention focused on a social problem and being able to move a tangible agenda that responds to that problem, and the tricky roles of brokers (intermediary agents) and grassroots actors in community problem-solving.

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local problem-solving as a distinctive "game," affected but not determined by decisions rendered at higher levels of government, see Briggs (2000) and Stone (2001).

Setting the Stage

Two sets of important trends establish the context for building political will and, with that will, changing systems that affect the well-being of children and youth in America. First, there are trends reflecting increased attention to important *social conditions*, among them: persistent inequalities between cities and suburbs and the concentration of poverty in many inner-city neighborhoods; the importance of the early years of life for healthy human development across the life course; changes in the traditional structure and functioning of families; the re-structuring of work, driven in part by massive technological changes and the demands of performing in a globalized, information economy; and the nation's changing demographics—in particular, the second great wave of immigration in our history and the ageing or "graying" of our population.

Not every social condition becomes an important or actionable problem, of course. As one influential analyst of public agenda setting puts it, "For a condition to be a problem, people must become convinced that something should be done to change it."[2] The point remains, however, that the politics affecting young people in our society, and the setting of "the agenda" at any particular moment, often responds to a convergence of interests in quite disparate social trends, beyond the indices of child and family well-being that tend to be the stock in trade of much advocacy work. More specifically, a consideration of this broad set of trends begins to suggest potent symbols for reaching stakeholders, an array of potential attention-focusing

events, and other leverage-able factors known to influence agenda setting in crucial ways.

On a second dimension, there are trends driving a *re-organization of authority relationships, accountability, and influence* in the society. Relevant to an incredible array of social problem-solving efforts, this second set of trends includes: a downsizing and decentralizing of government responsibility and a shift of public interest work to private and nonprofit sector organizations; increased demands for measurable performance by public interest organizations, including government agencies, nonprofits, and for-profit "social enterprises"; a loss of trust in expert-driven, top-down solutions to persistent problems and a corresponding call for the "community basing" of key decisions and activities[3]; and a strong demand for collaborative problem-solving processes and for alliances, networks, or other structures that build capacity and enable joint operational work across organizational boundaries.[4] From an earlier era in which big, authoritative, reasonably trusted government agencies tackled our most persistent social ills, then, we have emerged, still in a daze, into an era of challenging alliances, more participatory decision-making—including the pervasive bargaining that comes with—and much more varied "producer" organizations. And our tough social problems persist, firmly in tow.

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[2] Kingdon (1984), p.119.

[3] Or for "community building," including more participatory decision-making, as an alternative to failed, top-down social policies.

[4] On the privatization and "nonprofitization" of human services and other work, see Smith and Lipsky (1993). On the increased demand for measurable performance and other mechanisms of accountability, see Hatry (1993) and Kettl (2000). On "top-down" versus "bottom-up" or community-

If the first set of trends, in social conditions, suggests important substantive targets on which to focus public problem-solving, the second set increasingly prescribes, at least in general terms, *how* we should work together on the targeted problems. It is not surprising, in light of these latter trends, that a wide array of local partnerships that aim to mobilize significant action on behalf of young people converge on certain core values, assumptions, and operating principles, beyond their broadly shared substantive agendas. These core traits make the partnerships complex—both tricky to function in and tricky to understand when one looks in from the outside.[5]

First, such partnerships seek to create the momentum that comes with visible, near-term accomplishments as well as the impact that depends on more enduring changes, carried out over longer periods of time and at some significant scale and cost. That is, the partnerships are action-oriented "campaigns" for attention, money, and other finite resources as well as value-based "movements" that aim to change an array of existing beliefs, work habits, resource priorities, and institutionalized relationships.

Second, these partnerships seek to place hard data—numbers, where possible—at the heart of their advocacy, planning, and program activities. Accountability is emphasized as a key to persuasion, or case-making, vis-à-vis a

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based approaches, see Kingsley, McNeely, Gibson (1997), Walsh (1997), Chaskin et al. (2001). On the demand for collaboration, see Gray (1989), Cooperrider and Dutton (1999), and Moore (1999).

[5] This discussion draws on our interview data, as well as a number of case studies and broader analyses of ambitious local initiatives focused on children and youth, including Morley and Rossman (1997), Pittman and Irby (1998), Walsh (1998), and United Way (1993).

broad array of prospective supporters, from parents and young people themselves to service providers, elected officials, business leaders, and others. Yet many of the strategic challenges encountered by local change agents take the form of real or perceived differences in political interest, whether among organizations, influential individuals, or sectors of local public life. Other challenges include mistrust and a lack of organizational commitment—or slow, defensive organizational learning. None of these challenges is easily addressed by resorting to formal data. Being "data-driven" turns out to be necessary but not sufficient, as experienced advocates, planners, and policy analysts know well. Data can support as well as distract; it does the latter when political problems are thought to be reducible to technical-managerial ones.

Third, local partnership coordinators consistently emphasize building on local assets, for example by mounting efforts on existing organizations and strengthening those organizations wherever possible. Yet, like the protagonist of a certain grim sci-fi film who forages in a rough, borderless terrain for parts of machinery that he can put to use, change agents find that they must become assemblers and inventers of productive capacity, often inheriting and repairing the fragments of useful talent, know-how, and infrastructure that dot the landscape—pieces of useful capacity that are the legacy of earlier agendas, turf battles, and the piecemeal approach we take to so many social problems in our society.[6] Where capacity is missing, partnership

[6] The film is "Mad Max," and I am grateful to my colleague Mark Moore for supplying the admittedly stark analogy.

leaders work to fill in the gaps, either by renewing and retrofitting existing organizations or creating new ones to take on important work. Neither is a quick, easy, or low-cost option, but these steps are sometimes essential, since many partnership agents produce effects on children and youth only indirectly. That is, rather than being provider of front-line services, partnership agents work to make *other* actors more productive of beneficial goods or services, from child care to education, from after-school programs to mentoring.[7]

More problematic than the assembler-inventor role just outlined, many local partnerships assume, axiomatically, that the most significant outcomes desired depend on focused, sustained, well-coordinated, and well-measured joint action by multiple organizations acting in concert – that is, by operational alliances or "networks of capacity" of various kinds.[8] Such teaming up is often at the heart of systems change efforts, many of which have inherited the service integration and comprehensiveness goals of an earlier generation of interventions. As one observer concludes:

> It has become clear that the nation's splintered human service system needs more than patchwork reform; it demands a reorientation, an overhaul, to expedite service delivery and promote positive outcomes for children and families.[9]

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[7] A common strategy is to offer technical assistance, training, or other capacity building supports to service providers. Beyond equipping individual organizations, partnerships may help research, plan and coordinate inter-organizational work. For a general treatment of these types of functions, see Chaskin (2001).

[8] Moore (1999).

[9] Kagan (1996). And see Schorr (1988, 1997).

Since categorical funding and focused purposes have made specialists of most child-serving organizations, since politics makes eliminating or merging organizations challenging at best, and since trends favor outsourcing taxpayer-funded services to private and nonprofit organizations, the "reorientation" and "overhaul" involves putting the Humpty Dumpty of services together in coordinated function, if not in unified organizational form. This means alliances of many kinds and purposes. In fostering such alliances, partnership agents directly address the problem of how to coordinate and improve well-intended but fragmented activities on behalf of the under (or ill) served. But as detailed below, there is a significant research literature to suggest that high-performing organizational alliances are difficult to build and sustain even where each alliance partner is capable and committed, where there is a well-defined and shared view of the alliance's purpose, and where discrete performance measures exist or can readily be created (to focus partners' activities and hold them accountable to their commitments). Alliances that marry organizations with uneven capacity (a common event in the world of local service delivery), with differing views of some messy, value-laden problem to be solved, with disparate and shifting organizational interests, and with broad or elusive performance goals—such alliances face long odds indeed. One reason that local partnerships for children and youth seem compelled to navigate these challenging shoals, rather than being able to reverse course and avoid them entirely, is that alliance partners may contribute very different types of assets to the alliance. Some partners are valued principally for the *legitimacy* they confer in the eyes of

important stakeholders, or for their networks or access, not primarily for their productive capacity in the operational sense.

A fourth and final shared trait relates more closely to politics as we typically conceive it. Local partnership leaders, whether they are themselves organizations or networks or more informal structures, invariably act as bridges or brokers between disenfranchised stakeholders and community elites or influentials. That is, partnerships position themselves as intermediaries between "grasstops" and "grassroots." The intermediary must cultivate relationships with and be credible to some critical mass of both the roots and the tops, securing the precious intangible of legitimacy, as well as labor, funding, and other tangible resources. This bridging position creates significant opportunities to mobilize will and capacity across a broad base, but it creates daunting challenges as well. The evidence is that some bridges endure remarkably well and even evolve into new and unplanned but very productive problem-solving functions. Other bridges buckle under the weight of demands from each direction, compete unproductively with other bridging agents, or get by-passed for perceived failure to handle the political "traffic" well.[10] The latter case is perhaps most unfortunate of all: the would-be bridge or broker has become a non-player but continues to consume vital community resources.

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[10] There is too little discussion, let alone careful research, on these important and challenging intermediary roles. For an in-depth analysis of one very carefully seeded brokerage strategy centered on creating new community-based development organizations, see Gittell and Vidal (1999). Keyes et al. (1996), Dreier (1996), Briggs and Mueller (1997), and Marwell (2000) discuss some of the functions

Setting the Questions

In a field of demanding and urgent partnerships, in a world of such dispersed authority and uneven capacity to act on hard problems, where is the needed mandate—the political will—to come from, and in what directions should it be focused? Furthermore, is it necessarily the case that if the will is created, the needed productive capacity will follow? These questions seem all the more urgent in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the aftermath of bio-terrorism. Prospects that the economic security of many disadvantaged families will suffer in a recessionary slow-down, that key public budgets will not only shrink in the same cycle but be diverted to security measures, and that charitable giving will likewise shift in key ways, represent the big fiscal tip of the iceberg. More serious is the threat to that most precious of commodities in this harried information age: public attention. Advocates for the well-being of children and youth will be challenged to set and keep a significant agenda that matches important problems with viable solutions that address those problems. Such solutions will have to command the active support, or at least the informed consent, of a wide array of (currently) distracted stakeholders.

This paper is a stout tree with deep roots. It mines several large domains of research that are rarely applied to the issue of improving child well-being, including

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and limits of status and geography-spanning networks (a source of social capital) as a means of advancing neighborhood political interests.

studies of urban politics, public agenda setting, social movements, and organizational alliances. In so doing, the paper seeks to address two broad questions:

1. *What do we know about creating political will through locally-based agenda setting and "movement building"?* Answering this question demands that we reflect more closely on the nature of constituency building, the means by which public attention is focused and held on important public problems, the unavoidable *local*-ness of politics in cities, and the place of marketing and persuasion in political strategy.

2. *What do we know about tackling messy public problems through operational alliances – i.e., through structures that rely, by their nature, on creating and deploying productive capacity and sharing information, credit, and other useful resources across organizational lines?* Here, we will look critically at the some of the motivating assumptions, pivotal choices, key stages, and persistent shortcomings of partnerships old and new.

Bringing Politics Back In: Setting and Moving an Agenda from a Local Base

A number of astute observers of social policy and social problem-solving in America have noted the preference for technical-managerial language, and for consensus themes and win-win solutions over suggestions of give-and-take political contests (with clear winners and losers), in recent efforts to affect the well-being of children.[11] The pattern is particularly evident since the peak period of mobilization by poor and disenfranchised communities in the late 60s and early 70s. The avoidance of overt expressions of political interest (or disinterest) in young people in many local efforts reflects, in part, the conservative swing of the American electorate over the past generation—a swing linked, without question, to the flight of jobs,

[11] For example, see discussion in Stone et al. (2001).

wealth, households, and political power from cities to suburbs.[12] More broadly, says one analyst, "Inspired by a vague sense that reason is clean and politics is dirty, Americans yearn to replace politics with rational decision-making."[13]

The standard advice to change agents and advocates is to appeal to enlightened self-interest and to sell results and efficiency—at least more so than moral or normative commitments. One is told to emphasize the positive potential roles of stakeholders, instead of harping on grievances or highlighting differences in power and influence. Beyond adhering to the old advice to "catch flies with honey," however, it appears in some instances as though politics—that arena in which we deliberate important purposes and values and make difficult decisions that derive from the same—has been trimmed from the picture altogether. More specifically, great faith is placed in the notions that *evidence-backed ideas promising better results will persuade,* as long as they are sold effectively to the right players, and that *such persuasion will shift the key decisions* on which new outcomes for kids depend, even where sacrifices to existing interests are involved.

The flaws in this admittedly appealing and rather apolitical set of notions are several, and these flaws underscore the importance of building a constituency that supports change, even pressures for it, against considerable resistance. First,

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[12] There is a large literature on these demographic patterns and their social and political implications. See review and discussion in Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom (2001). These and other observers argue that this narrative, while accurate in broad outline, obscures the growing diversity in suburbs and thus a range of new political opportunities for organizing a more equitable public agenda, including one that favors investments in the healthy development of children, youth, and families. See also Orfield (1997).

[13] Stone (1988), p.305.

achieving better outcomes for kids comes at some opportunity cost in terms of alternative investments of time, money, and attention, so "better" overall is in the eye of the beholder, at least in the short term. If helping kids indeed helps everyone in the medium to long-term – from those who want safer streets to business and government leaders who want a more competitive local economy – it is nevertheless the case that many political decisions are driven by a fairly short-term calculus of losses and gains to specific agendas. Understanding stakeholder values, interests, and perceived trade-offs, therefore, and knowing how to negotiate those effectively turns out to be as important as being clear and data-driven (or knowledge-based) about one's own interests and substantive agenda.

Obvious as it may sound, the most systematic studies of public agenda setting wisely remind us that, in the political short run, differences in interest are indeed *negotiated*, not *eliminated* by persuading contenders to adopt one's interests as their own.[14] True, hard evidence on what does or does not work to accomplish some important objective can have a "centering" quality. That is, evidence, where intelligible *and* trusted, may rein in claims from ideological extremes, suggest helpful new alternatives for addressing differences among parties, or strengthen efforts to negotiate in good faith rather than through arbitrary claims. Moreover, deliberation that reframes important values and interests can provide parties with a much less zero-sum game: visions of what it means to win or to lose can themselves be transformed in time, influencing both what parties will accept and how satisfied they

are with the outcomes of the bargain.[15] But in the short run, most meaningful change cannot avoid producing political winners and losers, even if the losses are spread around, mitigated, or phased in over time. Deny this as an advocate, and I distract myself with clever messages while persuading few of those who do not already support me.[16] Significant change in any society cannot hinge on the creation of purely win-win outcomes.

Second, on the matter of threat, significant and durable change typically involves leaving behind much that is known for beliefs and habits that are unknown, and this entails risk. As cognitive psychologists have documented time and time again, most human beings do not reason well in the face of risk and uncertainty, and most find change to be fraught with uncertainties and therefore anxiety-producing, as the old proverb about "the devil you don't know" instructs.[17] This is true even where apparently objective, expert evidence is provided to lower the anxieties associated with unknowns, since the messengers may not be credible and the messages may be hard to swallow. Regardless of who the intended beneficiaries of a change effort are, therefore, or of the quality of the formal data or managerial fix-its employed to persuade, systems change involves a series of devils unknown or

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[14] See, e.g., Kingdon (1984), who focused on Congressional agenda setting in the late 1970s.
[15] Stone (1988), Kolb and Coolidge (1991).
[16] This point is clearest at the extremes. Deborah Stone reminds how far some advocates have gone to portray *highly* particular interests—"special interests," in the current political lingo—as being in the interest of the general public. She cites Charles Wilson's claim that "what's good for General Motors in good for the country" (Stone 1988, p.182).
[17] A large literature on cognitive process and interactive problem-solving examines this (discussion in Raiffa 1982), but closer to the uncertainties perceived in *change* processes, research on change management and learning in organizations has illuminated this quite effectively (see, e.g., Senge 1990).

unfamiliar—especially from the perspective of those whose habits and attitudes are most in need of change.

Third, buy-in by political elites and senior agency decision-makers is one thing, support by staff implementers and by client-citizens quite another.[18] In large public systems in particular, but in nonprofits and private firms as well, middle managers and line staff have considerable latitude to veto unattractive or threatening expectations perceived to be imposed from above.[19] Systems change thus includes an important "inside game" of organizational support building, risk taking, peer-to-peer encouragement, and new rewards for new behavior, alongside the "outside game" of sustaining political attention and expanding public and private resources.[20] In addition, grassroots participants, including families and informal community leaders, may veto change efforts if they perceive a threat to traditional perks, attacks on valued allies, or business as usual in top-down decision-making—the latter being a particular problem in the early stages of the elite-driven Atlanta Project.[21]

Building political will in support of a change agenda thus implies a series of strategic steps and a varied program of engagement developed over time and at several levels, from grassroots to grasstops and from pivotal organizations to the

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[18] In this paper, I use "citizen" to refer to a person's role as political stakeholder in a democracy, as distinct from the role of "client" for a specified service. I do not mean "citizen" as immigration authorities employ the term.

[19] This has been treated by organization and management researchers as a central effect of organizational culture and structure, by political scientists as an implementation problem of policies. See useful discussion in Bardach (1998).

[20] In management research, the "outside game" is sometimes called the "external environment" of an organization (Moore 1995). Both labels are admittedly organization-centric and may obscure important aspects of politics and political strategy that do not concern organizations in any direct way.

core, client-citizen stakeholders at large—the children and families themselves. The broad task of building political will might be thought of as including several component parts or elements. I will label these as follows:

a. Building movement by building constituencies that pressure for change;

b. Focusing attention to influence agenda setting on key problems; and

c. Navigating local political arrangements in order to advance specific agendas or "programs of solutions" that plausibly respond to highlighted problems.

The elements are outlined in Table 1 and explored below. In each instance, as we will see, a sizeable academic literature highlights remarkably durable, and sometimes sobering, patterns that obtain over many settings, time periods, and strategic choices by the players involved. Alongside these more traditional empirical studies, a more applied literature on local partnerships supplies the hard-won lessons and specific dilemmas most relevant in contemporary work; the latter body of evidence also transcends some of the formalism and conceptual blinders that constrain much academic research. Reasoning from the concrete problems of practice toward the theory, and then remembering to reason our way back again—this journey rewards the effort.

TABLE 1. THE ELEMENTS OF BUILDING POLITICAL WILL

Element	*Social and political processes (strategic work) entailed*

[21] Stone (2001b).

Building movement by building constituencies that pressure for change (mobilized players)	Identifying, building, mobilizing, and sustaining constituencies; clarifying commitments to pressure for change; developing leadership and infrastructure.
Focusing attention to influence agenda setting (adopted problems)	Framing and communicating issues effectively for public attention; matching messages to target sub-audiences (segments); using focusing events and linking to larger trends; developing a narrative that matches important problems with viable solutions.
Advancing the desired agenda (programs of solutions)	Building and breaking coalitions to authorize specific decisions and secure tangible supports (funding, time, networks, expertise); navigating distinctively *local* political arrangements, including relationships, repeat encounters, and linked bargains.

A. Building Movement by Building Constituencies to Pressure for Change

What does our history teach us about efforts to build significant constituencies that will exert pressure on behalf of a change agenda? It is noteworthy that for decades, students of politics considered efforts to secure political change via the direct mobilization of reformist pressure groups—movement building, in the classic sense—to be a largely irrational and disorganized mode of political behavior. True, the labor movement against abuses of big industry and the Progressive Era movement to curb the corruption and other abuses of urban political machines had had too significant an impact to be treated as marginal. And by the middle of the last century, Saul Alinsky had taken the sociology he learned at the University of Chicago to the streets to found the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and to develop and disseminate a practical theory of power and political organizing among the urban working class.[22] It remains the most influential grassroots organizing model in

[22] Alinksy (1946).

many parts of the country today. But with their eyes on a stable system of democratic "pluralism" in which elected officials responded to varied, organized interests that presumably kept each other in check, scholars largely dismissed insurgent movements and their leaders as misguided and radical.[23]

This view changed sharply in the wake of the influential civil rights, environmental, and women's movements of the 60s and 70s, as well as the related, and somewhat more dispersed welfare, redlining, and rent strike movements in urban neighborhoods.[24] The peak mobilization period of the late 1960s and early 1970s was followed by a sharp decline in mobilization among the poor and working class, alongside a sharp increase in the variety and scale of social movements with non-traditional political and cultural agendas, including religious, identity, and lifestyle-based movements. Often more conservative than their inner-city predecessors, these movements include the "suburban warriors" of the Christian Coalition and Moral Majority, as well as the gay rights movement.[25] Among the most influential *neighborhood*-based movements was the conservative homeowner and slow growth movement, which originated in Southern California, famously spawned

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[23] See, for example, Lipset (1960), Smelser (1962), discussion in Fainstein and Hirst (1995).

[24] In terms of mining larger lessons for problem-solving work today, it helps that many university-based scholars embraced these grassroots reformist movements and sought to treat their implications for American politics and society more generously than had earlier scholars. See especially Piven and Cloward (1979).

[25] These are sometimes termed "new social movements," in contrast to more traditional race and class-based movements. Fainstein and Hirst (1995).

property tax and growth control revolts around the country, and helped put California governor Ronald Reagan into national office.[26]

Newer progressive movements, especially those that seek some kind of low-income, grassroots base, often lack the ready target of a large, capable, legitimate government actor. As the public sector, and the welfare state in particular, shrinks and loses public trust, it is not always clear where pressure politics should be focused.[27] In addition, some observers debate the relationship between self-described "movements" on one hand and ongoing, institution-based political organizing activities—such as that of the San Antonio-based Communities Organized for Public Service, a project of the Texas IAF—on the other. For my purposes here, both hold lessons about doing systematic, direct, grassroots constituency building *and* negotiating with elite decision-makers around significant reform—beyond the standard electoral agendas of political parties.

What are the lessons of these relatively large-scale and highly varied movements and organizing activities for locally-based efforts to build a durable, influential constituency for child well-being in America? And what lessons emerge when such efforts are studied alongside the accomplishments and struggles of local partnerships specifically focused on children and youth? Reversing this latter question, what are the persistent dilemmas posed by such partnerships about which

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[26] Davis (1990).
[27] Fisher (1993).

movement builders might have something to say? Our interviews and reviews of research suggest the following key dilemmas:

- Developing standards of success for an important form of activity (constituency building) that creates awareness or supportive political attitudes (important intangibles) rather than tangible units of service—in other words, answering the question, "How do we know we are making progress?";
- Choosing a base(s) for organizing (neighborhood, demographic group, issue or professional sector, other);
- Balancing constituency organizing with service delivery demands and opportunities;
- Sharing leadership as the movement evolves;
- Bridging class and racial/ethnic divides;

In light of these dilemmas, the experiences of social and political movements, and of reformist organizing more broadly, hold a number of important lessons:

- *Movement success is a function of context and opportunity, not merely effectiveness at mobilizing stakeholders per se.* Most movements rely on strength in constituent numbers and influence via expanded public and elite attention to key problems. But a movement's success must be judged in the context of its political opportunity or lack of the same—in particular, the stability of elite alliances in favor of the status quo, the presence or absence of elites willing to ally with the change-demanding movement (elites who must still be actively organized to do so), and the readiness of a larger persuadable public to be persuaded about potentially controversial ideas.[28] Sometimes keeping an issue on the public agenda is itself an important victory and one that paves the way toward larger gains in a more politically receptive period. Appropriate *success measures* thus include indicators that an issue and set of policy choices is "on the screen" and receiving public and elite attention and that public attitudes

[28] Marks and McAdam (1998). Scholars have come to some consensus that there is always a constituency for significant change in a society. What varies are: (a) the degree of opportunity or space for pursuing change; and (b) and the presence of effective organizers able to mobilize and focus diffuse sources of pressure toward particular targets—thereby taking advantage of the space.

are shifting in measurable and supportive ways. Success cannot be measured solely by formal decision victory or budget dollars re-directed;

- *Having a neighborhood base both enables and constrains.* Neighborhood-based movements allow for a targeting of very labor intensive direct constituency building, well-defined issue development, the cultivation of discussion and action networks among neighbors, and the magnetism of recognizable, everyday problems. But most movements with a small-area geographic focus remain disconnected from one another, as well as from fundamental reform possibilities (policy scope) and larger-scale organizing and influence (geographic scope). This is in part a function of keeping the policy scope too narrow to engage a wider set of political allies and their interests or of not finding the cross-neighborhood training and leadership networks needed to take efforts to the broader geographic scale[29];

- *Beyond geography and status grievances, there are multiple bases for organizing constituent pressure.* Conflict and grievance are indeed tried-and-true mobilizing forces—everyone knows that school board meetings tend to get packed when there are real stakes *and* real disagreement—but grievance is in the eye of the beholder. As the new social movements (and local partnerships as well) illustrate, there are many bases for turning latent political strength into active, mobilized, broad-based influence on behalf of a specific political program.[30] These alternative bases include shared and respected social roles (such as parenting) and widely understood economic themes (such competitiveness). Such bases naturally demand outreach and messaging, however, that differs from that of more traditional, neighborhood-based organizing that draws on territoriality (stakeholders' desire to protect physical turf or "community way of life"), race and class grievances (such as perceived inequities), or other factors. Moreover, organizing around multiple bases is possible but presents challenges and risks of its own, including the risks of mixed messages and confusing expectations;

- *Sustained political pressure from below requires a constituent base independent of service provider organizations.* Many neighborhood pressure groups of the 60s and 70s had, by the 1980s, become professional, nonprofit service providers and, in some cases, large and complex bureaucracies in their own right. The grassroots grew up and, in the process, became increasingly reliant on public and private funding through grants and contracts.[31] Though many

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[29] Fisher (1993); Fainstein and Hirst (1995); Dreier (1996); Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom (2001). And there are analogs overseas, including the particularly well-studied case of urban popular movements in Brazil (Alvarez 1993; Gay 1994).

[30] Fainstein and Hirst (1995).

[31] Gittell (1980), Gonzalez (1993), Briggs and Mueller (1997), Smith and Lipsky (1993).

community-based nonprofits retain a self-image grounded in neighborhood activism, many claims of representativeness may not reflect active constituency building. This pattern is particularly important where a long-established organization serves a changing neighborhood or client group. Moreover, there appear to be distinct limits to the constituency building and scope of city or regionwide political influence that service providers alone can muster. This is true even when providers are linked in cross-neighborhood or statewide coalitions. Some additional, mobilized base of grassroots constituents, relatively free of both funder and service organization interests, is needed;

- *As a corollary, decision-by-decision access can win political battles, but a reliable block of votes (an electoral base) wins the war.* The importance of specific decision victories notwithstanding, implementing significant programs of change (linked decision victories over time) depends on building an electoral base[32]. It is the key to sustained response from elected officials, whose power, in turn, to authorize and invest in programs of change and to resolve fragmented interests (splinters) is crucial to coordinated, problem-solving action at any meaningful scale. The decade-long success of Coleman Advocates in San Francisco illustrates this point. Coleman successfully organized parents, through their door-knocking children, to support the nation's first dedicated local revenue source for youth programs. The organized voter base helped ensure attention not from one or two supportive and enlightened politicians but, in one particularly crucial election year, from every mayoral candidate in the city;[33]

- *Leadership development at the grassroots matters and is quite resource-intensive.* Most movements, but especially those with poor and working class core constituents, struggle with credibility and other types of problems associated with a heavily middle-class leadership structure. In responding to these dilemmas, developing grassroots leadership – particularly among the non-college educated and those who need to develop what are sometimes termed "public life" skills – turns out to be crucial, not surprisingly. This is *very* labor intensive work;[34] and

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[32] More specifically, the electoral base is crucial where such change agendas do not serve the immediate and tangible interests of a city's core economic interest groups, including major businesses. Businesses negotiate with their investments and campaign support; other causes must leverage voting strength. See Stone (1989), Warren (2001).

[33] Stone (2001) and Fainstein and Hirst (1995).

[34] The Texas IAF model continues to rely heavily on paid professional organizers, though lead volunteers, who are poor and working class, play important roles (Warren 2001). "Public life skills" include organizing and running meetings, building relationships to understand other's interests, understanding formal organizations in ways that inform reform demands, turning a private concern

- *Bridging race and class divides is not a unitary challenge or a simple matter of lead organizers' value commitments.* On the contrary, bridging success demands a variety of careful strategic and tactical choices, most importantly inclusive choices in the very early stages of an organizing effort, as well as a constant effort to counter forces that lead to splintering or disengagement. First, effective multi-racial organizing seems to hinge on: matching *outreach strategies and techniques* to the material and cultural circumstances of specific sub-groups; efforts to deliberate and sustain racially and ethnically inclusive *leadership structures; mobilization tactics* that address the strengths, values, and political habits of sub-groups; and *issue selection and framing* that secures and sustains broad engagement over time.[35] In addition, established ethnic organizations can be a mixed blessing in multi-racial organizing. On one hand, ethnic organizations with credibility and networks penetrating key racial/ethnic sub-groups can provide crucial access and credibility as well as organizing infrastructure. On the other, some ethnicity-specific service providers and advocates, including the civil rights "old guard" and other long-established groups, can reinforce existing divides and mistrust across racial and ethnic lines. The old guard may also narrowly channel organizing activities toward the interests of a particular generation or political outlook within an ethnic community.

  Second, *class* bridging holds challenges of its own. Except when grounded in a strongly held religious ideology, tightly-bounded identity, or core lifestyle choice (such as sexual preference), cross-class political movements rarely endure. That is, organizing efforts that cut across lines of educational attainment, income, and occupational status rarely sustain a core base that is class diverse.[36] However, efforts that assemble a *base* among low-income people and others outside of government (at the grassroots) can also forge useful but more fluid *coalitions*—beyond that base—with key middle and upper-income influentials, including those in business, government, and civic and cultural institutions (at the grasstops). A grassroots base with grasstops allies may be the simplest way of describing this combination, and it may be the most viable constituency target for many locally-based partnerships.[37]

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into a public issue, and more. See Reardon (1998) on building such skills through a university/community action research partnership in East St. Louis, also the "Community Building Curriculum" of the Boston Community Building Network (2001) and Interaction Institute for Social Change.

[35] Delgado (1993), Warren (2001). And see various publications and training activities of the Applied Research Center, directed by Delgado in Oakland, California, http://arc.org/

[36] Gendrot (1982), Fainstein and Hirst (1995).

[37] The case of the Beacon Schools innovation in NYC is instructive. The Beacons did not begin with a grassroots constituency but with relatively "connected" insiders who understood youth development, had access to decision-makers, and were able to develop a compelling vision of change that centered

Reviewing these claims in detail is the work of a volume, not a paper, and the remaining elements of building political will—setting and then advancing a tangible change agenda—now demand our attention. By way of transition, let me underline the point that the choice of a constituent base and the means employed to organize that base and focus its political pressure on behalf of some change agenda cannot be divorced from choices about which issues to place at the center of a movement's "public face," how to frame those issues for wider attention, and whose political values and interests must be understood and tangibly addressed in the process. These are the central choices involved in getting a problem, as well as a preferred program of solutions, on the public agenda.

B. Focusing Attention to Influence Agenda Setting

Until the late 1970s, when a landmark study of Congressional agenda setting in domestic policy was carried out by political scientist John Kingdon, much of the formal study of politics focused on how issues already on the decision-making agenda got decided rather than the crucial question of how those issues, and not others, got on the agenda at all.[38] The second element of building political will

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on youth-serving community centers based in public schools. Observers report that beyond the pilot phase, the protection and expansion of the Beacon program turned to a mobilized constituency of parents and community groups to pressure government in favor of the (already) demonstrated change.

[38] Kingdon (1984).

describes, in Kingdon's terms, how issues are transformed from mere *conditions* that may or may not get noticed to *problems* that influential players notice and wish to solve. Of particular importance are credible indicators, focusing events—a disaster, crisis, personal experience, or powerful symbol—and feedback from existing programs related to the condition. As examples of the latter, Kingdon cites streams of complaints about a program or innovative ideas that promise political or substantive benefits. On the matter of how conditions get noticed, Kingdon continues:

> People in and around government define conditions as problems in several ways. First, conditions that violate important values are transformed into problems. Second, conditions become problems by comparison with other countries or relevant units [e.g., benchmark cities or states]. Third, classifying a condition into one category rather than another may classify as one kind of problem or another. The lack of public transportation for handicapped people, for example, may be classified as a transportation problem or a civil rights problem, and the treatment of the subject is dramatically affected by the category.[39]

In addition to these forces shaping such "problem recognition," there is the larger stream of politics, in which elected officials, in particular, try to sense changes in the mood of the electorate, the rise and fall of interest groups, and the keys to winning upcoming elections. Independent of the traits of a condition (or recognized problem), such considerations create the steady stream of politics that strategists with many agenda setting objectives track closely. This stream affects policymakers assessments of the support that may exist to work on particular, ripe problems.[40] But

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[39] Kingdon (1984), p.207.

[40] Alternatively, support may exist for particular actions. If controversial, these actions can then defensible as "solutions" to problems that are then highlighted and found to be worthy of response.

as Moore notes, "Even though ideas must connect to political forces to become powerful, they are not necessarily slaves of an existing political balance. [Ideas] can become active agents in re-shaping the politics of particular issues."[41] Such ideas do not, we should take note, *do away* with politics or with political insiders' regular re-assessments of the public's concerns.

In addition to particular problems and the larger stream of politics, there are the key participants or players, some more visible and some more hidden, who intervene to shape agendas. Among the more visible are members of the media, key elected officials themselves and their political staffers, and the occasional public intellectual who directly affects what problems get on the agenda. The more hidden players, including career public servants, academics, and other experts, tend to have less direct influence on the agenda and more on the alternatives that get considered as the political demand for solutions evolves. Together, those inside and outside of government who act on a given domain of problems—children and youth, say, or public safety or economic development—make up the "policy community" on that domain. Ambitious local partnerships often seek to focus this interested community on *particular* alternatives for policies or programs, beyond raising awareness of problems generally. That is, change agents present not merely as issue advocates but as credible policy experts.

In recent years, a number of policy observers have offered helpful analyses of the issue framing and other persuasion strategies that help focus positive attention

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[41] Moore (1990), p.78.

on a given issue.[42] Essentially, these strategies acknowledge that to influence human behavior, information must be shaped and given meaning. That is, we reason not in a simple weighing of fact against fact (or fiction) but often through metaphors, through powerful, often unspoken emotional associations among ideas and the representations of ideas in symbols. We may take in facts but we look, instinctively, for indications of meaning. Frequent negative stereotypes of young people—for example, of the "no good" out-of-school 16-year olds—and positive associations with small children—the "innocent" and defenseless 3 year-old, say—often operate at this unspoken level. The images are powerful because the messages need not be stated—they are clear.

A core tenet of persuasion, and thus of strategic communication or marketing, is that facts themselves have little meaning until some frame is arranged to lend them meaning.[43] Frames, which classify facts, link facts to symbols, and even arrange these links in stories that we can absorb and transmit, can thus have powerful effects on the form in which an issue lands on the public agenda and how the issue is then treated by policymakers and interest groups. As Moore soberly concludes:

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[42] See, e.g., Schon and Rein (1994) and Gilliam and Bales (2001). The former are interested in how conflicting frames create seemingly "intractable" policy problems and political stand-offs. The latter note that the concept of "frames" is grounded in theories of human cognition and communication, which provide advocates with helpful insights into "how the public reasons" about issues important for public policy. The older science, of course, and the other root is public opinion research. Also see Lakoff (1996) on the power of moral frames to sway political attitudes.

[43] Cialdini (1984).

> Many ideas that become powerful lack the intellectual properties that policy analysts hold dear. Most such ideas are not very complex or differentiated. There is no clear separation of ends from means, of diagnosis from intervention, of assumptions from demonstrated facts, or of blame from causal effect. All are run together in a simple gestalt that indicates the nature of the problem, whose fault it is, and how it will be solved.[44]

A measurable shortfall in child care services in a community is, in Kingdon's terms, merely a "condition," against which an advocate may press the objective of large-scale public and private investments in creating new child care capacity in nonprofits and small businesses. But use a set of key indicators—numbers, words, images—to highlight this condition in the context of other important conditions, such as school achievement or health outcomes, along with evidence on programs and other arrangements known to have the power to change the child care condition and/or the links between child care and those other conditions. Use all these to tell a story about investments foregone, health bills mounting, a workforce shortchanged, and the public values of equal opportunity, capable families, and fiscal pragmatism unrealized. Keep the message simple, but hint at these multiple foundations for public action—to make families stronger by relieving the burden on struggling parents, to strengthen labor markets, to save taxpayer money spent unwisely on problems that might have been prevented. Now we have the makings of an urgent problem, perhaps a crisis, as well as the hint of solutions that we cannot long afford to ignore.

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[44] Moore (1990), p.79.

Fail to make these links, or leave it to someone else's strategy to frame them for us, and the same political objective, far from seeming constructive and urgent, can come to represent nothing less than big government intruding on the sacred obligations of the family—as nonprofit bureaucrats seek eagerly to expand their fiscal empires. Problem-solving thus includes an important non-technical element of building persuasive "stories" that can help people make sense of complex ideas and influence diverse interests to act in common cause.[45]

One particularly important problem in this domain is that of persuading others that issues that appear irrelevant, and benefits that appear distant, do, nevertheless, have broadly shared effects and wide, lasting benefits. Deborah Stone acknowledges that we have much more experience, as a society, with private application of what we might call broadening strategies. That is, we the public are regularly targeted by businesses messages portraying private benefits as strengthening the overall economy or even "saving communities" by protecting jobs.[46] But the existence of public education and Social Security are testimony to the positive power of this particular type of persuasion, which transforms what might initially appear to be an other-serving agenda into a big-tent public cause.

Kingdon's analysis of agenda setting illustrates the power and the limitations of framing and other communication tools. More specifically, the distinct factors that influence problem recognition and the advancing of specific alternatives for problem

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[45] On the particular function of planning activities as persuasive storytelling, see Mandelbaum (1991), Throgmorton (1996), and Baum (1997).

response, remind us why doing politics involves more than strategic communication or savvy marketing. Recognizing opportunities or "windows" (political space) demands attention to events, ideas, and interests well beyond the advocate's issues and communications strategy for those issues. A window may allow for new messages about child health, say, but the window may be *created* by an unrelated public budget controversy that happens to coincide with new union activism on behalf of family economic security. A specialist watching for key events and policy debates narrowly defined around child health could miss the key events, their coming together, and the window of opportunity created in the process.

Moreover, the mere existence of a favorable window does not guarantee that the advocate's problem will be recognized, and this is where strategic communication becomes important. Since even the most informed and insightful diagnosis of the political stream does not provide the proverbial crystal ball on where and how a window will open up, the key is in consistently *communicating about an issue in ways that make it more likely that a problem will appear or stay on the public agenda.* This entails making choices about:

1. The *indicators*—numbers, words, and images—that will grab and hold attention for the social condition about which the advocate cares, emphasizing comparisons to legitimate benchmarks or targets where possible;

2. The *frames* that will place the issue in a category of solvable problems, and link it to deep values and emotional associations, in ways that encourage action by the body politic and that (broadly) favor the advocate's preferred program of change; and

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[46] Stone (1988), pp.182-183.

3. The suggested *program of change* itself, since it must suggest some room for compromise as the political process evolves while providing the core architecture that make a substantively favorable process of solution building – i.e., smart choices, not just politic ones – more likely.

Note how choices about each of these might align in the strategist's favor. For example, indicators can be chosen with the desired frames in mind. Frames and their associated indicators can provide advocates and their audiences with the means for conveying powerful, relatively uncomplicated stories about the important public values at stake, (if possible) the availability of legitimate and technically viable solutions, and the urgency of timely action. Finally, programs of change can follow in logical ways on the problems as framed.

Given insightful diagnosis of politics (the "stream"), strategic communication that successfully attracts attention to a problem, and a few favorable contributions by key participants who provide alternatives for acting on the problem, would a specific set of favored alternatives – the program of change – advance in a given community? That is, would the program secure political support and the sustained resources needed to change the problem over time? The answer to this depends on how effectively a proposed program is matched with the landscape of interests and the capacity to act. This is how the agenda, once shaped, gets moved or advanced. It is a process involving coalition building and creatively generating tangible options. Beyond appealing stories, it calls for savvy negotiation and a bit of luck.

C. Advancing the Agenda, Navigating Local Politics

Movements may create will, and experts may provide attractive policy alternatives on which that will can be focused. But coalitions are needed to advance political agendas, especially where significant change is desired. At the local or regional level, these coalitions have several functions, as we will see, and understanding these functions, as well as the steps through which coalitions are made and broken, is our task here.

In the introduction to this paper, I claimed that much of the available advice on creating political will on behalf of the nation's children implies a kind of advocacy without context, politics without place. Either it is that generic advocacy strategies are thought to be readily adaptable to local and regional circumstance or that advocating and persuading per se are thought to be separable from the process of navigating the local landscape of political actors, interests, offers, and agreements through which agendas take shape and advance. To be fair, the theory and practice of advocacy politics have long acknowledged the importance of knowing one's audiences and forging favorable coalitions with those who might support one's policy proposals. These steps at least *imply* learning how the political landscape in Chicago differs from that in Miami, for example, or how both differ from Oakland and Des Moines.

But logically, in an era emphasizing the devolution or decentralization of decision-making about social policies and programs, advocates are obliged to develop tools tailored less to generic advocacy problems than to understanding and

navigating problems of local politics.[47] Complicating this picture is the possibility that the new funding, performance, and reporting obligations that often define devolution help re-shape local politics. The local game has higher stakes and, in the case of some policy arenas, shifting rules as well. For example, federal and state programs that emphasize local discretion but require particular forms of service integration shift the expectations placed on local players—and may shift the carrots and sticks with which locals must negotiate as well.

Studies of local politics over the past two decades are particularly helpful as we shift attention from the previous concern for how problems get recognized to that of how specific programs of solutions advance and win support. Forty years ago, the most influential analyses of city politics focused on "who governs," the title of Dahl's classic study of who exercised political influence in the arenas of urban development, education, and political nominations in New Haven at mid-century.[48] But the most influential research of the 80s and 90s has focused on who "produces" or, in other words, who succeeds in moving a significant agenda of tangible activities forward over time, across *many* decisions. In the terms of its most well-known analyst, Clarence Stone, the central concern of this research tradition is "power to" (get things

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[47] Included here is the politics linking a locality to the larger region and state and upward to a host of federal expectations. Keyes et al. (1996) argue that the leading localities in an era of devolution will be those that forge durable patterns of institutional collaboration around important problems, emphasizing civic networks and patterns of trust—social capital—in which some localities seem richer than others. But this involves politics and power, not relationship building in a pro-civic vacuum. Stone (2001) provides a superb analysis in the domain of urban education.

[48] Dahl (1961).

done) more than "power over" (excluding others from some arena of decisions).[49] Furthermore, and most critical for our inquiry here, "producing" is not a task for government alone; government must blend its capacity with that of private actors, such as firms, service provider nonprofits, unions, churches, and other non-governmental players.

Research on local politics, then, has increasingly centered on the question of how durable arrangements are made to accomplish important purposes. Interests are not treated as simple and fixed, rather as emerging "through action, social relationships, and experience"[50] – the very currencies in which locally-based change agents trade. Instead of hinging on the aims and actions of a well-defined "power elite" of players that exert influence in all issue arenas, the world of politics is seen as "messy and uncertain," with fragmented decision-making authority, influentials that choose to act in specific arenas that matter to them (and often inconsistently even in those arenas), and dispersed capacity to produce outcomes that stakeholders value. This is indeed the loosely coupled world that local partnerships for child and youth well-being generally report.[51] It can seem a world of "herding cats" more than re-directing a capable brigade that happens to have wandered off-course. In that world, coalitions have two crucial functions, each of which depends on sustaining relationships and allegiance over time:

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[49] Stone (1989), p.229.
[50] Stoker (1995), p.61.
[51] See, e.g., Walsh (1998).

- *To ensure the legitimacy of important public-interest objectives, as well as actions taken to achieve those objectives.* Consider efforts by the White House to build a worldwide "coalition" against terrorism, a priority apparent immediately after the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. The coalition provides the United States with tangible military and intelligence support, to be sure, but just as important is the political legitimacy that multi-lateral action confers. Legitimacy is priceless in a community of nations suspicious of unilateral action by a superpower—particularly military action in a very unstable and contested region where public opinion often vilifies U.S. interests. Closer to urban issues here in America, businesses and nonprofit community-based organizations often need each other to lend legitimacy to political arguments about who each group serves and what each deserves from taxpayers;[52]

- *To marshal the resources needed to ensure cooperation by many players over time.* A coalition extends the reach of a political agenda not only, say, by providing a wider voter bloc with which to influence elected officials but by providing a broad web of influence across a community. A coalition can span the many centers of authority, both inside and outside government, where decisions important to an action agenda take place. It is not only the grand deals but the day-to-day follow through actions that determine whether an agenda advances in tangible ways. A broad, sustained coalition can detect resistance and respond much more flexibly than a narrower set of actors working to win a one-off decision victory, only then to disband.

Over the past few decades, in a majority of American cities and metropolitan regions, the most significant and durable governing coalitions appear to be those linking business and government interests that focus on programs of growth: strengthening the local and regional economy, protecting business competitiveness, and developing land in ways that support these larger interests. With few exceptions, these coalitions tend to avoid value-laden debates over social policy issues or socially charged problems with few concrete and widely attractive solutions, such as racial

[52] See Crossette (2001) on recent events. Watkins and Rosegrant (1996) explore the need for legitimacy in the earlier Gulf War, which included many of the same players and dilemmas.

segregation, educational failure, and concentrated poverty.[53] Where key coalition builders and coalition members do attend to education or social services, says the research, they do so to protect their core interests in growth and to offer concessions that appease pressure groups, not to pursue the fundamental reform sought by systems change advocates.

What happens when local players aim for higher-stakes change in the arena of slippery, value-laden "social" issues? Even the most well-established arrangements can fall short. As Clarence Stone's provocative new work on urban education in 11 cities emphasizes, the strength of a governing coalition depends on its success at picking issues against which some program of viable solutions can then be constructed. Consistent with our discussion of communication and attention-focusing above, the coalition's chosen problems *and* solutions must be framed in ways that win sufficient support. Change the problems, and a seemingly powerful set of interest groups may be ineffective, showing a lack of capacity to mobilize collective effort in a coherent, productive way.

For example, a relatively stable, post-war Atlanta business-government coalition that effectively advanced a pro-growth agenda for four decades has stumbled in the face of the city's deep educational inequality and other problems tied to concentrated pockets of inner-city black poverty. Stone describes how weak "civic capacity" squandered the promise of urban education reform in the 1990s:

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[53] Stone (1989).

> With schools desperately in need of attention, with the education issue prominent in public discussion, with a diverse set of players coming together to elect a new school board, and with an opening to bring in a new school superintendent, Atlanta could have come together to build a high level of civic engagement around improving its education system. Stakeholders, however, did not joint their efforts … Civic energy was scattered among several organizations, each of which continued to pursue its particular agenda. No one came forward to summon the disparate players to join efforts and form an encompassing coalition with a comprehensive program of action … Distrust at various levels and across lines of race and class gives rise to Atlanta's weak form of civic capacity.[54]

Of particular value here is the insight that a saleable program of solutions to a problem must be matched with the coalitional support needed to advance and authorize that program. The concept is not fundamentally at odds with Kingdon's notion that agenda setting *begins* the process of matching recognized problems with acceptable policy alternatives that address those problems. But how such alternatives come to *be* accepted, how support is lined up behind them – these are the principal unanswered questions.

Broadly speaking, lining up support, and doing so in the loosely coupled local world we have outlined here, includes the two challenges outlined in Table 2, each associated with a set of strategic tasks. These are not simple, linear steps, but interrelated tasks that change agents confront. The first set involves the effort, not once-and-for-all but re-considered and renewed over time, to match the contents of one's agenda with the interests and capacities of the players whose cooperation is critical. As Stone finds in his 11-city study, a bold agenda means little if it cannot

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[54] Stone (2001), pp.600, 602.

command support by players capable, collectively of delivering. Likewise, a seemingly powerful coalition—"all the right players"—will languish in symbolic victories and talk-fests if the coalition cannot develop a coherent program to advance. It is the matching of program and coalition that produces significant results over time.

The second set of tasks involves mapping the influence terrain to help one do this matching: doing one's homework on the key players, their interests in whatever central issues the coalition will target, and relationships among these players that will influence their support. Our interviews underscored the point that being able to specify the interest we *wish* another party to have in our issue or proposal is quite different from being able to understand the other party's *actual* interests in the same. To put it plainly, when seeking to understand your politics and your likely behavior, I do not have to *like* your interests, nor do I have to share them. What is essential is that I understand them clearly. Strong judgments on my part may cloud this understanding, particularly if a history of disagreement or mutual suspicion divides us.

Next are the choices linked to the actual recruitment of parties to the coalition.[55] The classic recruitment question is this: whose support now would make others' support (later) more likely? If your support is important to me, for example, but I have limited access or influence where your support is concerned, can I recruit others who will get to you and make it more likely that our coalition wins your

support? The other consideration inverts this positive logic: whose opposition now would be so devastating that I cannot afford *not* to recruit them early?[56] With a knowledge of interests in hand, and with some thought given to sequencing, a variety of means are available to me to recruit parties to my coalition, including: the use of tangible carrots and sticks (the promise of benefits or costs) that matter to the parties; relying on patterns of deference that flow from the influence considerations discussed above (i.e., beyond interests, counting on Part A's support to leverage Party B's); and, cutting across these, framing support in the terms most favorable to win a party's support.[57] The latter is the very same concept we employed to understand the keys to agenda setting. The framing concept reminds us that recruiting political allies is less about slinging facts than creating meanings to which others will respond with real commitment.

TABLE 2. COALITION CHALLENGES IN LOCAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Challenge	*Strategic Tasks*
Building and sustaining favorable political coalitions while heading off the formation of adverse ones (or breaking such adverse coalitions once formed).	Matching: establishing and renewing the fit between agenda and audience (coalition players) Mapping: identifying players, interests, and relationships Sequencing: deciding who to approach, when, about what.
Navigating tensions between deciding and producing (direction setting and implementing).	Appropriately separating discussions about ends from those about means.

[55] Watkins and Rosegrant (1996), Watkins (2001).
[56] Sebenius (1996).
[57] Watkins and Rosegrant (1996).

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The second overall challenge in coalition building sounds infinitely easier than the first—that of building up per se, on which we have focused so far. But this second challenge, that of navigating tensions between deciding and producing, makes or breaks a coalition over time, as a number of widely observed cases of local innovation on behalf of children and their families demonstrate.[58] Furthermore, this tension cuts to the core of the world we have made via devolution, the downsizing of government, the explosive growth of nonprofit providers, and the intensive critique of experts solutions that lack a community base.

In a world where few should decide and few actually produce goods or services, both setting directions and implementing those directions are relatively straightforward matters (albeit not terribly democratic ones). We now live in a world, though, where many should decide and many produce, or so we have come to believe, for the sake of making decisions better and more legitimate and making production more successful. In such a world, it is not surprising that coalitions include a complicated mix of players who wish to both help decide and help produce. That is, players at the table often find themselves negotiating roles, responsibilities, and resources for carrying out productive work, not just policy or program directions to guide that work. Many of those treated as expert in the matter of which directions should be taken are also those with the available capacity and

[58] Walsh (1998), in a review of New Futures, is particularly instructive.

legitimacy needed to pursue *any* direction—experienced service providers, for example, both inside and outside of government.

It is not so clear how discussions about direction and discussions of implementation should be separated. In the terms a colleague of mine prefers, how do we separate debate over which hill we should take from the working out of how to take the hill?[59] And should these discussions operate under the same rules? There is some clear evidence, both in analyses of politics and of organizational alliances, that some boundaries are needed between direction setting and implementing. Both dimensions include political work of persuasion and influence, but as the San Francisco youth budget and other advocacy successes illustrate, interest groups pressuring for change command legitimacy and clout to the extent that they emphasize the importance of a broad *public* interest, beyond the particular interests of organizations that may be given the authority and resources to act. Likewise, implementation decisions that get confounded with decisions about overall direction tend to paralyze collaborative work, as we will soon explore in the context of alliances.

The point of these reflections is not to suggest that a tidy science of coalition building exists to give anyone perfect control over, or even perfect information about, the messy world of local problem-solving that we seem to have made for ourselves. Rather, the notion is to unbundle the oft-used concept of "coalition" into strategic tasks we can deliberate, review, and get better at on behalf of some

problem-solving agenda that matters. Unbundled or not, the daunting array of tasks outlined here makes it clear why there is such room for entrepreneurs in a fragmented system. More than room, there is a vital need for effective agents that mobilize collective action, for such agents can serve crucial functions of getting work specified, organized, and carried out. Understanding these elements of the work—what it takes to *produce* together, beyond creating political will in the abstract—is the task of our final inquiry below.

Producing Together: Forging "Partnerships" that Matter

As the inventors of the industrial assembly line, and their ancient forbears who built monuments, recognized, there are in the end but two challenges to getting things produced in the world: dividing labor and then coordinating it effectively. For most of the modern era, we have relied on relatively hierarchical organizations made up of expert specialists to handle most of this division and coordination. Both the twentieth-century corporation and the public agency developed as such, and so have many nonprofit organizations. As a rule, categorical funding to meet human needs has directly encouraged the proliferation of such organizations with specialist missions that are, in turn, composed of specialized units.[60]

Rapid change in the demands of work, the expectations placed on organizations, ease of information access, the locus of production and exchange (globalization), and social conceptions about authority in the past 50 years have

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[59] I am grateful to political sociologist and veteran organizer Marshall Ganz for this metaphor.

challenged many of these rules. It is not that hierarchies or chains of command have disappeared, only that the limits to their usefulness have become more glaring in the past generation. Practitioners and researchers alike have chronicled the shift toward "flatter" organizations, worker empowerment, wider networks, and project-based work that does not fit the traditional model.[61]

How does any of this relate to the well-being of children in our cities? The strategies of many systems change efforts parallel, in broad terms, the strategies of organizations in a wide variety of work domains over the past generation: turning disconnected specialist units ("stovepipes") into cross-functional teams; and forging productive alliances across organizations—both to improve measurable performance or create more value for customers. Step back a little, and it becomes clear that these two aims are one and the same: how to produce jointly a good or service or end outcome that was previously the separate responsibility of multiple producers. The overall logic is to entrust some kind of team structure to both dividing labor well and coordinating it much better than more traditionally structured organizations are able to do. In the context of child well-being, these efforts often aim at "service integration," a phrase in use since the War on Poverty era and Nixon's "New Federalism" reforms, as well as service innovation that reflects continuous learning and growth.[62] That is, we wish to change systems that are clearly fragmented as well

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[60] Kagan and Neville (1993).
[61] Gray (1989), Mintzberg (1983), Moore (1999).
[62] Kagan and Neville (1993).

as inadequate – and the latter in part because of the former – into systems that serve children and their families holistically, cost effectively, humanely, and creatively.

Teams launched with such aims may cross units *within* an organization, such as agency departments that affect kids but fail to coordinate their work, or cross whole organizations. In the latter case, we often call them "alliances" or "partnerships."[63] As one overview of this burgeoning approach explains it, such terms "can be applied to a wide variety of inter-organizational forums where information and resources are shared and exchanged to produce outcomes that one partner working alone could not achieve."[64] And if contributors or evaluators can *demonstrate* improved performance or the production of such outcomes, such teaming up is indeed worthy of the phrase "strategic" alliance or strategic partnership. In an era that encourages alliances, collaboratives, or partnerships of so many kinds with such gusto, however, it is not always clear how strategic a particular alliance is or can be – whether the often significant costs of forging an alliance and sustaining it, for example, are outweighed by the benefits.

But the plot thickens. On this topic as on many others, the work of social problem-solvers has been heavily influenced by business models and decisions

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[63] But an endless number of terms is employed to capture "co-production," including: collaboratives, networks, consortia, and so on. Although "team" is a term typically applied to workgroups of individuals rather than of organizations or other larger actors, the concept of team captures much of what we care about. Moreover, there is some evidence that alliance efforts are driven by workgroups of individuals who become invested in joint problem-solving and work to bring their organizations along. See Bardach (1998) and Kato and Riccio (2001). Members of those guiding teams even demonstrate what I think of *as creative deviance*, looking for ways to solve problems that challenge the rules and dominant habits and perspectives of their organizations. This tension can be a source of real innovation and real strain as well.

[64] Waddell and Brown (1997), pp.1-2.

popular among businesspeople. Management gurus generally encourage for-profit firms to develop "collaborative capacity," one element of which is the ability to size up potential alliance partners and make very careful thumbs up or thumbs down choices about alliance relationships.[65] Fair enough, but the yes-no calculus is presented as hinging on relatively straightforward indices of "value" and competitiveness, such as market share, profitability, and perhaps experience in new markets or new technologies.

By comparison to this presumably "disciplined" model for for-profit alliances, the product of trial-and-error and observation across thousands of settings, alliances among public interest organizations struggle to define clear purposes, performance measures, and even the distinct types of capacity needed to partner effectively. One reason for the struggle is the complexity and variety of boundaries that such alliances cross—often all at once. Beyond crossing the boundaries of *organizations* (by definition), social problem-solving alliances increasingly cross these tricky boundaries as well:

- *Boundaries among the sectors – public, private for-profit, and private non-governmental.* A growing crop of alliances that are "cross-sector" or even "tri-sector" must manage the very distinct expectations, interests, and resources that organizations in these domains typically bring to the table;
- *Boundaries across types of work,* for example organizations that have traditionally policed young people alongside organizations that serve youth or their families. Such boundaries are challenging to cross well even where

[65] See, e.g., Kanter (1994) and Gulati (1998). Austin (2000) applies a similar logic to assess strategic alliances between businesses and nonprofits.

public agencies are principally partnering with each other and not with businesses or nonprofits[66];

- *Boundaries among types of "producers,"* for example organizations defined and funded primarily by providing goods or direct services versus organizations that advocate, coordinate, or build knowledge (or all of these) for a living[67]; and
- *Boundaries across levels of operation or targeting,* for example among very localized informal resident-based groups that may or may not be incorporated as organizations, neighborhood-based organizations, city or regionwide organizations, and national organizations.[68]

Changing systems to improve the well-being of children aspires to crossing a host of these boundaries—and doing so rather quickly, one might conclude from the available case evidence and concept papers. Particularly problematic is the bandwagon instinct: recruiting very widely, appealing to a group or organization's broad interest in a problem without initial regard for that actor's specific capacity to affect the problem in a concrete way. There is no a priori reason to think that this bandwagon or big-tent approach is inherently flawed, particularly not in a local world of fragmented capacity and dispersed legitimacy to act on messy problems—the world we described in the previous section. Moreover, "partnerships" with social purposes, as we briefly noted in that section, *are often political coalition and operational alliances at the same time.* That is, such efforts are distinctly unlike most business-to-

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[66] Bardach (1998).

[67] Granted, "services" can be defined to encompass almost any sort of work, including political campaigning and community organizing. But the distinction between "direct" services aimed at client needs, and a variety of more indirect activities, is an important one.

[68] In a study of community development, Ferguson (1999) helpfully distinguishes these as four "levels" of the system, beginning with informal groups (level zero) and ascending to formal

business alliances that stick close to operational production and financial transaction. Social purpose or social problem-solving alliances seek to mobilize legitimacy and political will (the classic functions of a coalition of interests) *and* the productive capacity needed to affect social outcomes (the joint "production" that effective alliances enable). The problems in the bandwagon obtain, then, from the confusing roles that would-be partners find themselves in as they tackle both politics and operational production, as they act on *both* "the will and the way" in the terms of this paper.

There are almost as many ways to characterize the challenges of alliance building as there are forms and purposes of alliances. In general, Gray's three-part rendering of the stages of alliance building capture some of the most recurrent and important challenges that systems change confronts.[69] These stages also reveal some of the basic failures that social purpose alliances suffer:

1. *Problem-setting:* clearly defining the core problems that joint work will target, in effect the purpose of the alliance or collaborative approach. Partners ask questions here about what is fundamentally at stake and for whom, i.e., who are the legitimate stakeholders and are they involved in the effort?;
2. *Direction-setting*: defining guiding values, overall strategies or options, principles for working together on the chosen problems.

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community-based organizations (one), area-wide organizations (two), and upstream state or national organizations (three).

[69] Gray (1989), pp.55-94, in fact defines these as stages in *collaboration*, a process-focused term as broad and suited to social-purpose "teaming up" as "alliances." The distinctions between process ideas and structure ideas is not crucial for my purposes here, as long as we acknowledge that "alliances" can and do assume a wide variety of forms. In social problem-solving if not in business, any decision to pursue a collaboration can be termed an alliance. Not all collaborative efforts lead to equal degrees of engagement. Moore (1999), in a review of British research on local safety partnerships, notes the following most common outcomes: the communication model (parallel play); the co-operation model (agree to work on problem together); the co-ordination model (pool resources); the federation model (integrated services); and the merger model (collective resource pool).

3. *Implementing ("structuring")*: working out detailed tasks, roles and responsibilities (of partners to each other and to clients), and operational changes needed to deliver on the directions set. This is the nitty-gritty of re-organizing both the division of labor and its coordination.

Our concern, it seems to me, is not that there ought to be a one-right-way for social problem-solving alliances or partnerships to get established, maintained, or—where appropriate—dissolved. Nor should any of us, in a retreat to the comforting tidiness of the technocratic view, assume that any alliance can track Gray's stages in a linear, orderly fashion. Our proper concern is with the underlying pitfalls that this three-stage model helpfully illuminates: a lack of clarity on fundamental purposes and core stakeholders; a failure to outline broad strategies that hold genuine promise vis-à-vis the problems that motivate the partnership; and beyond mere relationship building or felt commitment to a common cause, a failure to re-organize operational work in ways that will deliver on those fundamental purposes.

Social problem-solving alliances are challenged to *pick problems well, develop strategies effectively*, and do the hard work of *producing smarter*. The evidence is that such alliances often engage organizations with uneven capacity, differing views of a messy, value-laden problem to be solved, disparate and shifting organizational interests (as leaders come and go and community politics poses new opportunities and threats), and broad or even elusive performance goals (complicating efforts to make good judgments about a partnership's true costs and benefits). Well-intentioned funders may enable prospective partners to make more informed

decisions and invest resources in re-designing work. But funders may also complicate matters by encouraging: "shotgun marriages" when unprepared partners are hastily brought together; or unwieldy coordination that reflects a preference for collaborative approaches more than tangible evidence that performance has improved through joint work.

Some important players in these alliances are not organizations at all but stakeholders at the grassroots or grasstops, both individuals and groups, who assert a role and exert influence. Because social problem-solving efforts often appear to function as political coalitions and operational alliances, the final thread in our plot reveals itself: stated aspirations to improve "services" notwithstanding, these efforts are not mere managerial experiments. They reflect a community's effort to deliberate about important social problems and decide who can legitimately and competently respond to those problems. The politics and management of partnerships are deeply inter-twined, particularly in locally-based efforts. Moreover, some influential players are valued principally for the legitimacy they contribute, or are perceived to contribute, to problem-solving, not for the operational value they add to jointly produced services.

Confronted with these realities, players in a local system may grope along, or "muddle through," to borrow a tried-and-true image. Cookbook management how-to's, while useful, often give short shrift to these realities or imagine a world of rational actors unencumbered by perception problems, mistrust, or information overload. No agent of local problem-solving can be expected to have perfect

peripheral vision or a comprehensive systems view of all these dynamics and layers. According to the protagonists of these local dramas, perspective itself – perspective on what is hard and what is possible – can be as hard to gain or maintain as the will to forge ahead.

Two final points about this world, and about the keys to alliance building, seem particularly urgent. One is that *brokers* or intermediary agents are crucial in these decentralized systems, and brokers are compelled to perform a variety of functions (see Table 3).[70] What defines these agents, at least when they are fulfilling these functions, is that their value is defined by what they enable others to do, by how they promote collective action and collective capacity building. There is far more than generic relationship building entailed.

[70] Gray (1989) discusses, more specifically, the value of facilitators or conveners to collaborative process. So do a host of negotiation and conflict resolution materials, where the functions of mediators and third-party facilitators are well-established and well-studied (see, e.g., Susskind et al. 1999). Gittell and Vidal (1998) and Chaskin (2001) also offer partial but very helpful views of these functions, drawing more on organizational perspectives.

TABLE 3. FUNCTIONS OF BROKER AGENTS IN LOCAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Conditions	*Broker Roles*	*Functions*
Conflicts in real or perceived interests (turf)	Facilitator and Knowledge Manager	Educating parties about each other and about targets of their work, establishing and mending relationships, identifying or providing resources to ease trade-offs.
Duplication and fragmentation of effort	Orchestra conductor	Improving learning and coordination, helping troubleshoot and monitor operational arrangements.
Inconsistent standards about varied, value-laden work (partnerships that are unfocused or non-performing)	Performance investor	Helping others define and achieve credible performance targets, creating a sense of "membership" that includes privileges as well as obligations (and consequences for non-performance).
Insufficient legitimacy and capacity to make progress on shared problems	Organizer	Identifying stakeholder groups and helping them to organize, identifying capacity gaps and helping others to get gaps filled.

The second point is that confusion on the roles of grassroots actors can be particularly disabling, dysfunctional, and threatening to collective efforts. Such confusion, or the outright manipulation and gaming that may obtain, can erode trust, generate difficult stand-offs, and rob important ideas of legitimacy and momentum.[71] Moreover, confusion over grassroots stakeholders' rightful roles and contributions can leave fertile ground for conflict that is shrill and self-serving, as opposed to the healthy forms of conflict that mobilize stakeholders, clarify stakes, and encourage

[71] Documentation of such unpleasant dynamics is predictably hard to come by, but Kato and Riccio (2001) provided a helpful discussion of the challenges entailed in forging and sustaining effective collaboration among agencies and residents in the community-based Jobs-Plus employment

divergent perspectives. Our era demands more "bottom-up" problem-solving and the engagement of traditionally disenfranchised stakeholders in decisions and actions that matter – beyond "ritual participation."[72] As such, getting clearer on the distinct grassroots roles, the various ways in which these roles can be fulfilled, and the distinct forms of capacity needed to fulfill the demands of these roles effectively – achieving a little more clarity on these questions is long overdue. Table 4 suggests some starting points organized by Gray's three stages of collaborative work.

I leave the reader to consider these tables as claims for further discussion, inquiry, and experimentation. At least for now, I will spare you another chapter, a treatise on the implications or roots of these claims.

TABLE 4. ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF GRASSROOTS ACTORS IN PROBLEM-SOLVING

Domain[73]	*Role contributions: what grassroots actors can provide*	*Examples/references*
Problem-setting: which problems? Defined how? What stakes? Whose stakes?	Decision-making information and legitimacy	Political organizing, civic visioning, policy deliberation groups
Direction-setting: which overall strategies and options? Under which guiding values?	Decision-making information and legitimacy	Community advisory and planning groups, participatory strategy task forces, decentralized management with stakeholder input
Implementing (producing): what tasks? Assigned to whom? With what performance measures (success indicators)?	Productive resources (information, labor, capital), access to networks, information on culturally appropriate action	"Natural helpers," community outreach, community self-help, "barn raisings," participatory design

demonstration. The multi-city demonstration allowed the researchers and practitioners alike to learn across sites.

[72] This phrase was employed by a number of critical observers of government-initiated "public participation" efforts, particularly in the major federal anti-poverty demonstrations of the late 60s and early 70s, such as the Community Action Program and Model Cities. See Piven and Cloward (1979), Arnstein (1969), Briggs (1998).

[73] Per Gray (1989).

Conclusions and Puzzles

> We are living at a time when one age is dying and the new age is not yet born.
>
> Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*[74]

We all think and act in ways that make the world around us seem simpler and more manageable. We do this even more aggressively, but at greater cost, when the world changes faster than our habits and ways of thinking can change. When we view a messy world of problem-solving in highly technical terms, for example, we imagine a tidiness and order that *would* exist if only others could be made to see the world the way we do. We labor tirelessly at persuading "them" to share our interests and motivations. And our very hopes for changed systems that produce better outcomes for children blind us to the distinct kinds of work involved in getting a community to mobilize, construct a mandate, and produce in new ways. In particular, we easily forget that much meaningful change in the world depends not only on positive motivation but on steady pressure demanding the change.

What is more, we do not seem to learn as effectively as we should across communities. There are best practice reports that continue to emphasize the formal contents of programs or interventions that serve people, but these alone have never been enough to ensure the broad replication and scaling-up of "what works."[75] One reason is that cataloguers of interventions perform a vital service but cannot conceive

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[74] May (1975), p.3.
[75] Schorr (1997).

of the many "non-rational" ways that social and political arrangements will get negotiated in particular communities.

On this second front, there are the largely academic studies of politics, which find durable, but awfully abstract, patterns across communities. The political tradition names hard truths and trade-offs, and it dissuades us from exaggerating the uniqueness of each local context. But studies of politics often divorce these insights from the information particular actors need to work in and actively re-shape those contexts. If best practice advice is often about actors without context, political research is too often context without room for new actions and more effective actors. It emphasizes the constraints on action rather than the room to act.

Finally, studies of how work is organized and capacity deployed—of strategic management, in the broad sense—help somewhat, though this material leaves one perplexed about how organizations relate to the larger realms of politics and public values. Management has taught us most where we get a view of the small "p" politics of re-shaping traditional work arrangements, such as through teams within and across organizations. There is much that local practice can learn from the largely untapped body of evidence on these topics. Partnership is an old idea about which we all but refuse to consult the history.

Confounding our attempts to learn from any of these bodies of work, or from planning or other helpful traditions of inquiry and action, is a tendency toward booster-ism—creating confidence by de-emphasizing shortcomings, forgoing the appropriate self-criticism through which collective efforts can develop. In some

cases, and here my evidence is truly anecdotal, a local effort may even suffer under an excess of ambition to prove itself a "national model." Human pride, the need to make others feel that they are engaged in something important and potentially noteworthy, and the particular penchant we show in America for "demonstrations" no doubt encourage this. Moreover, some ambition along these lines – aiming high – is probably healthy. But local problem-solvers run the risks of distraction and even a certain amount of self-deception over their contributions – what it is that does and does not make the model a model.

Our responsibilities to grassroots stakeholders, and to disadvantaged children and families in particular, become particularly murky in the world I have outlined in this study. On one hand, they are the ultimate stakeholders. They bear the greatest costs of failed systems and enjoy the key benefits when systems can be changed for the better. As such, grassroots stakeholders are sometimes enabled to authorize the work we do (or the people who do it), a step that demands sharing power in ways that we are still learning about and, evidently, still uncomfortable about in many instances. Folk at the roots are also important sources of information on which problems, and which types of solutions, demand society's attention and commitment. And such actors are often co-producers of the better social outcomes we need, joining and directing service-provider organizations or extending the reach of those organizations through family and community ties and insider cultural knowledge.

As pivotal as these grassroots roles are, and as crucial as it is to know how to promote each and navigate among them, none of the serious problems we face, amidst the new distractions and threats of the world since September 11th, can be solved through the creation of a grassroots constituency or bottom-up mandate for change alone. If our serious problems could be solved in such a one-way way, mandates would be delivered, resources shifted in relatively straightforward fashion, and decision-makers held more accountable—period. Resources, however, come with interests and important information about problems attached, and even the most imperfect organizations endure with some useful habits and knowledge in tow. This is why so many social problems are "community" problems in the broad sense of that word: they are multi-issue, multi-stakeholder, and multi-level. Our problems demand the attention and the continuous learning of resource providers, opinion leaders, and other influentials as well as grassroots stakeholders. Surely some of the most important puzzles ahead are about how we develop a *menu* of options, not one best mousetrap, for mobilizing the grassroots and the grasstops in ways that enable them to problem solve together.

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